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Alpha Kappa Alpha as an educational institution and component of supplemental education

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This paper explores Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated as an institution of education. With its principles rooted in racial uplift, this sorority emits four key principles: education, sisterhood, community consciousness, and the appearance of womanhood. The principles, in combination with active membership, help members to develop self authorship and develop cognitively and socially.

For a hundred years, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated (AKA) has educated and prepared its members for the social and communal action for racial uplift. Its members are found all over the world and number more than 200,000 women (Alpha Kappa Alpha, 2008). The founders of this sorority were taught the foundations of African American womanhood and community consciousness at home. They used these lessons to build AKA and instilled them within the initiates that followed in their footsteps. Recent research shows that social capital, such as membership in AKA, provides increased social interaction, cognitive development and greater success in college (Broh, 2009; Pike, 2003). AKA, as a source of social capital, is rooted in principles of racial uplift and a reflection of a cause for equal citizenship felt throughout higher education at the time of its founding (Shaw, 1996). This paper will explore AKA as an educational institution and answer two key questions. First, how does AKA, as an educational institution and product of higher education, supplement the college education of its members with principles rooted in racial uplift? Then with a foundation to understand this supplemental education, how is this education beneficial to these women?

In order to answer these questions, a historical analysis was done in order to determine the social context and position of Black women at the time of AKA's founding and explore how this time period influences and shapes the organization's principles and concerns. In addition, a review of current research was examined that supports student involvement in student organizations as beneficial to their college education. In result, it is concluded that the higher education provided for African American women at the time of AKA's founding shaped the teachings of the sorority into four major principles: education, sisterhood, community consciousness, and the appearance of womanhood. All four principles are grounded in the concept of racial uplift. As a result, the college women involved in this organization are provided with a supplemental education that is not only beneficial to its

members, but the African American community as well.

An African American college education in a Post-Civil War America

AKA is intrinsically connected to the institution of higher education that its founders experienced. This institution took form at Howard University, but is not separate from the collective idea of education that administrators, at the time, believed was needed by young African Americans to be successful in a prejudiced society (Shaw, 1996; Evans, 2007). Based on the fact that African Americans were seen as unequal to America's White population, African American college graduates were seen as levers in making the society equal (Shaw, 1996).

The colleges open to African Americans from 1870 to 1930 were Northern elite universities, such as Oberlin and Mount Holyoke, and missionary and state-supported historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Shaw, 1996; Williams, Ashley, Ingram & Rhea, 2004; Solomon, 1985). While institutions struggled with what to teach these students (Solomon, 1985; Shaw, 1996), they agreed that "education was vital to [African American's] practical efforts to vote, to work, to acquire and protect property, and to develop their community" (Shaw, 1996, p. 73). The community, as well as the person, benefited from an education. Evans (2007) states that although education and literacy did not always guarantee complete freedom and justice, they did improve the quality of life that one could provide for him or herself. Going to college, for those privileged enough to attend, was the first step to personal and racial progress.

HBCUs, in particular, also possessed a missionary spirit that many believed would be an essential element that could accompany these newly educated students in their community. The Baptist Home Mission Society helped to support two HBCUs, Spelman and Hartshorn College. In 1908, its Superintendent of Education, Malcolm MacVicar, said the following about a missionary spirit: "It is one thing to give young men and women such industrial training as will fit them to earn successfully a good livelihood; yet it is another thing to imbue them with a missionary spirit and fit them to be instructors and leaders of others. The latter...should be the chief, if not only, work of the Home Mission Schools" (Shaw, 1996, p. 71). The American Missionary Association (AMA) also held beliefs that the "influence of Christian leaders raised up from themselves" would be the best solution to the ills that faced African Americans (Shaw, 1996, p. 71). Although Howard University was a religiously independent and private university, its first president and early trustees maintained close ties with the AMA. This notion of a missionary spirit and Christian values set a unique foundation that was outside of the vocational education normally provided for African Ameri-

cans and the classical education White men were receiving at this time.

HBCUs are particularly known for preparing their students with a community consciousness. This community consciousness is a combination of race consciousness and racial uplift. Before the emancipation of American slaves, African Americans were connected by the collective experience of slavery (Shaw, 1996, p. 55). The collective experience of involuntary servitude that binds this community together meant that their own success was connected to the success of their community. This success was also contingent on the respect their race received. Hine & Thompson (1998) states that in the late 19th century "[Educated African American women] believed that African Americans were judged by others as a group, not as individuals. If they were to receive the respect to which they were entitled...they would have to make sure that all other women were equally worthy" (p. 181).

Racial consciousness has been described as national identity and even race nationalism (Shaw, 1996). The consciousness is understood by African Americans but then and now is a point of confusion for those outside this race. In "The Nature of Race Consciousness," W.O. Brown (1931) described the obligation and insider's notion of race consciousness: "They must serve it, fight for it, be loyal to it. To the outsider, the race of the race conscious may appear to be an imaginative construction, but to the initiated, the race is a reality, in a sense, a personal experience" (p. 92). The experience of knowing how it felt to be African American bounded these students to a cause that they learned about at home and would be re-taught in college.

What a women ought to be and do

For African American women in college at the beginning of the Jim Crow era, a college education meant they would learn what "a woman ought to be and do" (Shaw, 1996, p. 75). A woman ought to be a reflection of her family and community's values. Going to college would mean that they would learn all the elements of being a woman who could be responsible for race matters. Although many of these college women were from prominent families who had prepared them with the best manners and moral standards, colleges looked at them as a tabula rasa (Shaw, 1996). Starting from scratch these institutions taught them to say "thank you" and "please," and stressed the importance of clean clothes, teeth and fingernails. Manners and appearance were associated with their place in society and how their race was perceived as a whole. Presenting themselves in the best manner combated long-standing stereotypes of African Americans. To go further, schools emphasized that "every action revealed their manners, good or bad" and "they learned 'the ways you look, the ways you speak, the ways you act, the ways you move, the ways you eat' should always remain at the forefront of

their consciousness" (Shaw, 1996, p. 82). College women of this time were described as aiming for "a high standard of womanliness, which includes scholarship, good health, justice and fair play, self-control, a love of beauty, courtesy toward all and an essential goodness of heart" (Evans, 2007, p. 67). The appearance and manners of an African American woman were important to her race and therefore important to her. For women, this was most important because many believed that if women were allowed through the door of opportunity the rest of the race would follow. By attacking the stereotypes of the African American woman and the overall race, African American women could reconstruct the perception of African Americans by whites and uplift the social standing of their community. One writer from the *Fisk Expositor*, the newspaper of Fisk University, stated why all of this was most important for women to observe: "The place occupied by women is said to be the best test of the real advancement of any race" (Shaw, 1996, p. 81). On top of being presentable, women, as well as men, were required to accept positions as the race trailblazers and to always remain community conscious.

The things African American students produced on these campuses were also a reflection of the lessons they received in school: community consciousness, missionary spirit and the correct way of acting and working. As the number of students on campus grew and upon approval from these institutions, student groups and societies were formed to take the lessons learned inside the classroom outside to the campus community (Evans, 2007). The historically African American sororities that emerged with the creation of AKA were "an intersection of popular womanhood ideals, academic ambition, and desire for a public voice...they at once confirmed and subverted women's stereotypical social roles" (Evans, 2007, p. 52). They were dedicated to social uplift, utilized a cadre of students dedicated to community activism and empowerment, and individual achievement (Evans, 2007). It is important to examine the first sorority for African American women in order to gain a complete understanding of African American sorority members and the complex education they receive as members of these organizations.

Sorority Membership Equals Racial Uplift

As a product of higher education and the ideals of racial uplift, AKA has a large emphasis on the principles that describe racial uplift. As an organization they emphasize the importance of education, community consciousness, sisterhood, and the appearance of womanhood. These principles are both blatant and hidden within their organizational documents and the personal actions of their members. The preamble of the organization states

the following:

We, as college women, being aware of the increasing complexity of women's problems, especially those Negro women, and realizing the necessity of forming an organization for the purpose of studying and solving such problem, do therefore organize this Sorority in order to cultivate and encourage high scholastic and ethical standards, improve the social stature of the race, women, and keep alive with graduates an interest in college life and progressive movement emanating therefrom.

Based on this preamble the organization is composed of college women that have come together for solving complex problems facing African American women in hopes of raising the social stature of these women and their race. The principles of this organization are all touched upon in this statement. The statement serves as a launching pad for which all the sorority activities occur, as well as teach the foundational purpose of this organization.

Principles are both taught as well as manifested as an obligation for having rights within the organization. Eva B. Holmes, a graduate member in Raleigh, North Carolina, writes the following about the obligation to AKA: "Unless a college woman realizes that sorority membership carries along with it duties and obligations...she can never be or become a sorority woman. The very nature of the word 'sorority', implies definite inter-responsibility" (1938, p. 13). This obligation is similar to the obligation that educated black women felt to their communities at the beginning of their club movement. As listed in the "The Ivy Primer," the manual for new members in training, the three obligations that sororities ask their members to assume are:

1. To concern themselves with acquiring high standards of academic achievement, intellectual development, and social maturity
2. To contribute to the well being of the chapter and remain a contributing member for their years as well as their years after college
3. To maintain an active interest and awareness concerning their college campuses and communities. (AKA, 1989)

All of these obligations and their components are found in the four principles that are essential to and taught by AKA.

Education

As a product of higher education, the sorority sees education as a key part of its members' lives. All but two of the founders were documented to have taught in either elementary, high school or college (Parker, 1999; AKA, 2008). The organizational purpose cites its duty in cultivating and encouraging high scholastic standards (AKA, 1989). Along with having a required GPA for admittance, new members are encouraged to maintain their good grades if not improve them while maintaining membership (AKA, 1989, AKA, 2009).

Appearance of Womanhood

The founders of AKA were brought up in an age when Black women were fighting to redefine their stereotypes through their appearance. This organization put emphasis on how women should carry themselves. Universities who felt the need to start from scratch with their students sponsored organizations such as AKA to help transmit lessons on how a woman ought to be (Shaw, 1996). In addition to this, it is clear through the preamble that the founders wanted to increase the social standing of the women and the African American race. While considering this principle, we must remember how much appearance meant to mobile Black women in the early 20th century. It is an equal part of racial uplift as education.

Community Consciousness and Sisterhood

The organization states that its purpose is to be of service to all mankind (AKA, 1989). Service to all mankind through publication and programs has translated as concentrating on the issues that affect the African American community. Numerous articles in the *Ivy Leaf* and national programs showcase the importance of service and elevating the social ills of women and children. This is a direct connection to the community consciousness maintained by African Americans and reiterated by a college education. Community service and civic engagement in the form of political empowerment and community-centered programs are all driven by a community consciousness. This community consciousness in many ways is developed into sisterhood. Just as African Americans are connected by race, these women are connected by college and like character.

Some differences that you may see in African American sorority sisters are their continual obligation to their sorority and sorority sisters, just as we see in their obligation to race. In many of the documents, programming and membership training, sisterhood appears as frank criticism and an ethic of care. It is manifested in the community that the sorority provides and the attitude that must be present to maintain and perpetuate the sisterhood.

Being a good "Soror" or sister is also contingent on your obligation and fulfillment of the other principles. It is these differences that set this organization, and others like it, apart and particularly essential to the development of college educated women.

How Membership Aids the College Education

"Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience" states that there are three components that result in integrated outcomes for college students: academic, social and institutional (Keeling, et al., 2004). AKA fulfills this social context and works along with academic and institutional context to produce cognitive and emotional growth. AKA prepares their members to reform their appearance, value education and participate in a community consciousness. Keeling says that this type of reframing helps students to "reflect on their lives, their values and their behavior and consider whether or not previous choices remain useful or productive to them" (p. 9). In result, AKA becomes a part of a transformational education that helps to develop members' multidimensional identity and consider how their values and behaviors contribute to their world and local community (Keeling). The ideas introduced in the Learning Reconsidered article are in step with the principles of racial uplift that AKA provide college women. While members are taught in a transformational way, they receive this education through a lens of sisterly obligation handed down by older members of the sorority. Some could argue that this creates a combined atmosphere of challenge and support needed for self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999). In addition to self-authorship, cognitive and emotional growth, and transformative education members in this organization develop social connections and leadership skills (Kimbrough & Hutchenson, 1998).

Afterword

Education, civic responsibility, appearance and sisterhood are all rooted in the principles of racial uplift and together with activity in the organization create a transformative education. AKA is unique not only in the sense that it paved the way as the first Black sorority but also its methods of teaching 19th century principles of racial uplift in a modern world. Those principles are the driving force that makes this organization continue to contribute to higher education. AKA equips college women with skills for success beyond the college classroom. Catherine Durnell, a member of Alpha Theta Omega chapter of AKA, said in her 1933 *Ivy Leaf* article, "A Plea For Our Ideals," that members of AKA are "challenged to bring out the very best that is within us, to brighten the little niche in which we find ourselves,

and to truly let our lives be a help to man and a wreath to Him" (1933, p. 26). Although AKA was the only historically African American sorority explored in this paper, it is not the only example of this type of supplemental education. All of the historically African American sororities provide a similar education for its members in their own unique way. Student Affairs should look at these organizations as not only social organizations, but also a

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